1: Hart & Pilling E-5 (1928-1954) 1960
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Tiwi Marriage

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Cultural Isolation

PEOPLE WHO LIVE in the congested cities and towns of the modern world have difficulty in realizing how different life can be at the hunting and gathering level of human existence. The basic fact about the life of hunters and gatherers is the thinly spread-out manner in which they live and the isolation of families and households from each other. In the case of the Tiwi, these conditions of isolation and dispersal were accentuated by their island habitat. Melville and Bathurst Islands lie off the northern coast of Australia some fifty to eighty miles from Darwin, which is the administrative capital of the empty north. They are separated from the mainland by about twenty-five miles of open sea at the narrowest part. This distance is slightly greater than the distance that separates England from France at the Straits of Dover, and just as the dim outline of coastal France can be seen from England on clear days, so the dim outline of the Australian mainland can be seen from the southern edges of the islands. However, Tiwi tradition is firm and certain that before the white man's arrival there was no contact between the islands and the mainland. To them, the dimly seen coastline of Australia was *Tibambinumi*, the home of the dead, to which all Tiwi souls went after death. It follows from this they they regarded the inhabited world as composed of their own two islands, and on those islands they lived a self-contained and exclusive existence. Occasionally outsiders appeared, either castaways from surrounding areas, including presumably the Australian mainland, and in recent centuries, fishing boats and pirates from Indonesia, loosely called "Malays" in the literature. To such visitors from outside, the Tiwi were consistently and implacably hostile. Their own traditions and what little written history there is of "Malay" penetration into the Arafura Sea both tell the same story. Outsiders who landed on the islands were massacred or vigorously resisted. Whether they were classified as *Malai-ui* ("Malays") or *Wona-rui*

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(Australian aborigines from the mainland) they were not Tiwi and hence not real people, or at least not human enough to share the islands with the chosen people who owned them.

Thus, the word "Tiwi" did not mean "people" in the sense of all human beings, but rather "we, the only people," or the chosen people who live on and own the islands, as distinct from any other alleged human beings who might show up from time to time on the beaches. This exclusion of outsiders from real "us-ness" and hence from real "human-ness" was continued when the Europeans began to arrive in the early nineteenth century, and certainly as late as 1930 the Tiwi continued to call and think of themselves as Tiwi, *the* people, and to use other words for all non-Tiwi, whether they were mainland aborigines, Malay fishermen, Japanese pearl-divers, French priests, or British officials, who penetrated into their exclusive little cosmos.

Their firm tradition that the twenty-five miles of ocean were adequate to isolate them from the mainland is confirmed by certain objective distributional evidence. Several characteristic features of mainland native technology were absent on Melville and Bathurst Islands, notably the spear thrower and the curved (or return) boomerang. To anthropologists, the idea of an Australian tribe lacking spear throwers and curved boomerangs is almost a contradiction in terms, and the only feasible explanation is isolation and hence failure of these mainland traits to diffuse to the islands.[1]

That no culture stands absolutely still in its technology no matter how isolated it may be is suggested by the fact that the Tiwi, while lacking the spear thrower and curved boomerang of the mainland, elaborated their wooden spears to a complexity of design and a degree of decoration unknown on the mainland, and also developed a much greater assortment of straight throwing sticks, made of hardwood, than any mainland tribe. Moreover, their carved and elaborately painted grave posts are unique among Australian tribes, and point up both the Tiwi isolation from the mainland and the favorable food situation which permitted the leisure time necessary to manufacture the elaborate posts as well as the elaborate ceremonial spears. In the nontechnological aspects of their culture we find in many respects the same absence of mainland traits and the same elaboration of traits that were distinctively or even uniquely Tiwi. Male initiation ceremonies on the mainland focus upon circumcision or subincision or both; neither custom was practiced by the Tiwi, who instead included in their initiation ritual the forcible plucking out of the pubic hair of the novice. The degree of plural marriages achieved under their marriage rules was far greater than anything reported for the mainland; the absolute prohibition of any female, regardless of age, being without a husband was unknown elsewhere in Australia; certain features of the kinship system fail to conform to any of the mainland norms, and so on. Wherever we look in their culture we get the strong impression of an Aus-

[1] A toy spear thrower, played with by children, was in use, but this may be the result of post-white contact. Its native name—*puni*—seems most un-Tiwi, and a likely guess is that it was introduced by Cooper's mainlanders, being accepted as a toy for children but scorned as childish by the adult men.

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southern coast of Bathurst Island. In 1886, the Australian government tried to erect channel markers on the southern shore of Melville Island, whereupon the Tiwi immediately "salvaged" both cloth and iron from them. During June and July of the same year the ship *Jane Anderson* was stranded on the shoals of first Melville and then Bathurst Island. Also in 1886, two Malay proas were wrecked on the north coast of Melville Island. That year was a great one for looting.

Occasionally visitors came ashore on the islands. The Stokes' survey party landed in the late 1830's, but saw no natives. A government party crossed Melville Island in 1887; the Tiwi speared its leader. In 1895, a government tourist party went to look over the ruins of old Fort Dundas; they kept their eyes open and no one was injured. In 1897, Joe Cooper, a buffalo shooter, tried to make a living from the Melville Island buffalo; he was speared and retreated to Darwin.

Tiwi treatment of outsiders prior to 1900 had been to rob them, spear them, kill them. This is not, however, the picture painted by modern Tiwi when talking of their past. They claim that their ancestors greeted each new group of strangers with the cry: *"Pongki! Pongki!"* (meaning, "Peace! Peace!"). But then it should be noted that before 1900 many a Tiwi peacemaker carried a spear between his toes. Yet under these circumstances the Tiwi world view did alter. First there were those changes which came from an attempt to understand the new objects which were suddenly thrust into the Tiwi world: the trade knives and axes given by Dutch navigators, the matchlock guns used by the Malays and probably the Portuguese, the rice given to Tiwi by the surveyors under P. P. King, the Indonesian water buffalo introduced by the British at their short-lived settlement, the coconut palms the English left behind them, the cups and plates from shipwrecks in the 1880's, and the flour tossed overboard to lighten foundering vessels. The Tiwi cherished iron knives and axes, readily recognizing their greater efficiency. The Tiwi begged for them; they stole them; and, when a spar washed ashore bound round with iron bands, the natives burned away the wood and took the iron away to grind into axes. The matchlock gun, and even the later flintlock, could be coped with; when one saw the flash, one ducked flat, just in case the weapon worked, and then rushed in to impale the stranger with a spear. Rice was useless; it looked like the larvae of the termite, which was not good for anything anyway. Buffalo were to be killed; they kept wallowing in the best waterholes. Coconut palms were a great disappointment; they were bigger than the local cabbage palm, but when cut down, did not have the same succulent interior. Plates were too much bother to carry around, but cups were worth saving for a while. Flour could be used for white paint, but it was not as good as the best white pigment near at hand.

Other modifications took place in Tiwi life before 1900 as a result of action by outsiders. Probably the greatest of these alterations came as a result of slave raiding, or "black birding" as it is called in the South Seas. The Tiwi always kept their young women hidden from strangers, even if they were just visitors from other bands. The old men rarely left camp. Therefore, it was the

2: Mountford E-5 (1954) 1958
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others that the culture of the Melville and Bathurst Islanders was markedly different from that of the adjacent mainland people.

It seemed evident, also, that this difference in the cultures was the result of isolation for which two possible factors were responsible: (a) the natural water barrier created by the Dundas and Clarence Straits (Fig. 1), and (b) the inability of the Tiwi to cross those swift and dangerous tideways in their primitive canoes. These canoes consisted of no more than a folded sheet of eucalyptus bark, sewn together at either end with strips of lawyer vine, caulked with mud, and strengthened at the gunwales with light saplings. The old men of Melville Island assured me that, before Cooper brought across the mainland wooden canoe (1905) bark canoes were their only means of water transport.

I am convinced, from my personal experience with similar canoes in north-eastern Arnhem Land, and my sea journeys across the Dundas and Clarence Straits, that the bark canoes of the Tiwi were far too weak to have withstood the buffetings of those turbulent waters. Nor would it have been possible for the mainlanders to have made the journey before they acquired the wooden canoes from the Malays, which reliable historical records indicate was not before the end of the eighteenth century.[3] Previous to that time, these people would have had only a bark canoe similar to that used by the Melville and Bathurst Islanders. It would be some time, too, after the aborigines acquired their new wooden craft, before they would be sufficiently skilled to make that perilous journey to Melville Island, even had they wished to do so. Further, the Tiwi were notably unfriendly and killed anyone who visited their shores. It is likely, then, that during the historically short time that the aborigines of the mainland possessed the wooden canoe, their visits would have had little, if any, effect on the culture of the Tiwi.

From this evidence, it appears certain that for an unknown, and possibly a lengthy period, the aborigines of the Tiwi tribe have been almost, if not completely, isolated from outside cultural influences.

This supposition is supported by Hart (1930, p. 170), who states that, "It was impossible, in fact, quite unnecessary, for them (the Tiwi) to visit the mainland in their bark canoes, . . . Until the advent of white men, the Melville Islanders were not aware that any other people existed but themselves."

Foelsche (1882, p. 17), however, states that "The Melville Islanders occasionally visited the mainland for the purpose of stealing lubras (women),

[3] Mountford, 1956, p. 410.

3: Hart E-5 (1928-1929) 1930 OI20 Tiwi OI20

refer to one another as *yia yirt'amini* (my "one grandfather") in preference to *yi'iwuni* (my brother), or *yia kalipini* (my half-brother), which is the normal term of address.

A member of another horde found trespassing upon the territory of the *Tiklauila* would be killed immediately unless he had been invited for a corroboree or some such festival. A member of the same horde who, not belonging to the *yirt'amini* group, trespasses in *Tayio* would not be put to death, but he and his relatives would become embroiled in a serious quarrel with the group.

Tayio is the best example of this peculiar institution because being in an out-of-the-way peninsula no one needs to go there except people who have a right there. Consequently the *Tayiauwila* can exercise a much stricter supervision and hence as a matter of fact guard their rights more jealously than the people with such rights over districts that lie upon the main roads of the two islands. Nevertheless the whole of *Tiklaru* is divided into such districts and the whole of the *Tiklauila* into such *yirt' amini* groups.

Thus bordering on the *Tayiauwila* to the east, we find the *Arupula* who have similar hunting and food-collecting rights over *Arupi*, the coastal district in the middle of the south coast of Bathurst Island. The origin of their title is lost in obscurity inasmuch as nobody to-day knows who the ancestor was or exactly where is the grave that gave them such a right. Nor is the *Arupula* title respected as much as is the *Tayiauwila* partly because *Arupi* is crossed by several "high-roads"—notably the only road to *Tayio* from the east, and the *Wraygwila* road to the Mission Station —but even more because the present representatives of the *Arupula* are either uninitiated youths or peaceful old men.

This introduces what is perhaps the main factor in the perpetuation of this institution—the power of the *yirt'amini* groups to enforce their rights. The ownership of a particular territory by a horde and the punishment of trespass upon it can always be enforced because there is always a certain number of fighting men in the horde. Hence horde-ownership is respected. In the *yirt' amini* group, however, periods frequently occur when the group is not strong enough to enforce its claims, and unless the claims are constantly brought under the notice of the rest of the horde they are ignored. The result is that unless the family gets a new lease of life by boys growing up into formidable warriors, such a

123 The following day we finally went hunting. Peter, his wife Dorrie, and daughter Althea, Filicy and her son Crissy-Boy, Albert, Agnes and I all squeezed into the canoe and paddled about two miles upstream to the next landing. Tudiunginarim, "white-paint-place," [177] used to be an old camp of the white buffalo shooter, Joe Cooper, who at the turn of the century was the first white contact for many of these people. It was very hot and the women took their children 123 into the water, waist deep near the bank, for a swim. It was easy 291 for them in their *nagas*, for when they came out they merely wrapped a dry one around and slid the wet one off underneath very 515 modestly. I, in my shorts and shirt, finally gave in to the temptation 609 and, vowing that if I were to live here longer I would take up the native costume, went in fully dressed. This modesty was a funny thing; they who wore no clothes until contact with white men, were being modest only for my sake, and in return I could do no less. So with dripping clothes, which incidentally felt wonderful in the heat, I set off following Albert and Agnes.

123 The nature of the bush was the same as that in back of 224 Minianapi and indeed the same as that around Snake Bay: the same trees, the same burned earth, the same fan palms and pandanus, and the same flatness. The natives always knew where they were; I never did. We were looking for possums and as these furry marsupials sleep in hollow trees during the day, we investigated every likely tree for evidence that they had recently climbed it. Sometimes the little tears in the rough bark could only be seen silhouetted against the sun; at other times the dry ground around the base of the tree would show very definite tracks. Soon Agnes, who was off somewhere to the left of Albert and me, gave two high-pitched calls. [198] In the hunting language I had already learned, one call meant "I'm here, where are you?" and would be answered by their companions with a similar single call. However, two calls meant "Come; I've found something." So we turned in the direction of the call and soon found Agnes standing by a short, hollow tree. Albert took his axe and cut a long pole which he then thrust up through a hole in the tree's base and wiggled. Out popped a large grey possum which sat on the top of the tree trying to make itself as small as possible. Agnes and Albert threw all manner of sticks and stones at it and finally managed to knock it down, when it scuttled away.